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Written Testimony of Ilicia Balaban, Issue Associate
Before the Connecticut General Assembly Transportation Committee

Friday, March 6, 2009

Written testimony supporting Raised House Bill 6623, An Act Concerning Connecticut's Response to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, P. L. 111-5.

Senator DeFronzo, Representative Guerrera, and members of the Transportation Committee,

The Connecticut Public Interest Research Group (ConnPIRG) is pleased to submit this testimony supporting Raised House Bill 6623. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) provides the state of Connecticut an enormous opportunity to revitalize our economy, create new jobs and protect our environment by incentivizing transit. How we spend the federally allocated transportation dollars will determine the efficacy of the ARRA with regard to job creation, economic revitalization and environmental stewardship. It is therefore of paramount importance that monies are allocated to public transportation projects that address these concerns with full transparency and accountability within the legislature, executive branch, Department of Transportation and municipalities receiving funds.

For the transportation stimulus funds to reach their full intended potential, projects selected must be additive in design and execution. Connecticut can not afford to use ARRA monies for projects that would have happened regardless of the federal infusion. This money is intended to create new jobs and provide residents greater access to transportation alternatives. Funds must be dedicated to new transit projects or ones that have been stalled for decades with no foreseeable implementation. ARRA funds must reduce our backlog of transit projects and be used in furtherance of proposed projects that would otherwise never happen.

Nationally, transit ridership has increased 30 percent over the last decade. Metro-North recently reported a four percent increase in ridership in 2008 alone. Volatile gas prices, increased highway congestion and the threats posed by global warming emissions have forced a change in how Connecticut residents think about their daily commutes. Unfortunately, the state has not been able to keep up with rising demand for transit service.

Many of our most promising transit projects like the New Haven-Hartford-Springfield Commuter Rail Line have been delayed for lack of funding. The tracks exist but are in serious disrepair, just waiting to be rehabilitated and carry commuters between these three cities, the economic backbone of Connecticut. The ARRA provides ample funds that could be used for

projects such as this but not without a solid commitment from the legislature to hold Governor Rell and her agencies accountable for the allocation of these funds.

Access to public transportation is a key factor businesses consider when determining the most advantageous location that will allow their workers an easy commute and bring in customers. Increasing and expanding our public transportation system is therefore crucial to revitalizing our economy and incentivizing business development. The towns along the New Haven-Hartford-Springfield corridor for example would benefit greatly if businesses had a reason to invest in their town centers.

Increased development depends on connecting the state's towns and regions in such a way that offers residents access to dependable and efficient public transportation. It is imperative that the projects we fund through the stimulus program are forward thinking and designed to connect municipalities and Connecticut to surrounding states within the Northeast. We are putting ourselves at an economic disadvantage if we do not take this opportunity to tie all of Connecticut to the booming economies of New York and Boston.

The priorities for stimulus spending stated in this testimony have been publically endorsed by the Governor, her agencies and the legislature. However, it is not enough to approach the spending of ARRA funds with good intentions. The bodies ultimately responsible for deciding how this money is spent must publically disclose a sound plan prior to distributing funds and must be held accountable as monies are released. Because Connecticut must follow a strict timeline as determined by the ARRA legislation, it is also imperative that the disclosure of selected projects and reporting on the progress of said projects happens in a timely manner befitting the regulations determined by the federal government.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony today. ConnPIRG fully supports HB 6623, especially the provisions that would require the Department of Transportation (DOT) and Transportation Strategy Board (TSB) to disclose all transportation decisions within 15 days of this bill's inception and to report on all actions thereby holding the agencies accountable within a month following the initial disclosure. ConnPIRG urges the committee and the General Assembly to approve legislation that will hold the responsible parties accountable for spending ARRA monies on the new transportation projects that promise the greatest economic benefit to the state. Full transparency, oversight and accountability, are crucial to ensuring that Connecticut receives the full benefit intended by the ARRA by dedicating transportation funds to additive projects that will create new jobs and assist our economic revitalization.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Ilicia Balaban".

Ilicia Balaban

Issue Associate

Connecticut Public Interest Research Group (ConnPIRG)